



“VAN IN THIS WORLD; PARADISE IN THE NEXT” THE HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF VAN/VASPURAKAN

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Rivaling the Ararat plain as the heartland of historic Armenia, the land of Vaspurakan holds a special place in the hearts and minds of the Armenian people. According to Armenian tradition, it was here at the fortress of Hayk, in the valley of Hayots Dzor, that Hayk, the national ancestor, established one of his first settlements in the south-central part of the country that, like his fortress and its valley, would forever after be known in Armenian by his name, *Hayastan*.¹ Here was located the core of the Nairi lands, the little known political formations that were the earliest states on the high plateau, and here lay the center of the kingdom of Biainili, called Urartu by the Assyrians, and today often known simply as the Kingdom of Van.²

The center of Nairi and Biainili (and of the Armenian land of Vaspurakan to come) was and remains Lake Van, one of the most striking features of the Armenian Plateau. An extraordinary natural feature, it was created in prehistoric times when an eruption of Mount Nimrud at the western end of its basin closed off the egress of what must have been an extension of the present river named Bendimahi-

¹ Movses Khorenatsi, *Patmutiun Hayots* [History of the Armenians], ed. Manuk Abeghian and Set Harutiunian (Tiflis: Mnatsakan Martirosiants, 1913); reprinted (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1981); trans. Robert W. Thomson, *Moses Khorenats'i: History of the Armenians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), cited hereafter as MK. For Hayk, see MK, p. 88 (book I, chap. 11).

² For Urartu, see B.B. Piotrovskii, *Vanskoe tsarstvo* [The Kingdom of Van] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1959), English trans. J. Hogarth; B.B. Piotrovsky, *The Ancient Civilization of Urartu* (New York: Cowles Book, 1960); N.V. Arutyunyan, *Biainili (Urartu)* (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1970). For the Urartian sites around Van, see H.F.B. Lynch, *Armenia: Travels and Studies*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green, 1901; Beirut: Khayats, 1965; New York: Armenian Prelacy, 1990), pp. 53-76.

chai. Called Vana Lij or Vana Tsov (Lake or Sea of Van) in modern Armenian, it was known in ancient and medieval times as Lake Bznunik³ or Rshtunik⁴ after noble families whose principalities lay along its western and southwestern shores. This pear-shaped body of water, lying some 5,600 feet above sea level, is approximately 75 miles long and 40 miles wide at its broadest point. Covering an area of nearly 1,500 square miles, Lake Van is more than six times larger than Lake Geneva (223 square miles) but considerably smaller than Lake Ontario, the smallest Great Lake (7,300 square miles).⁵ Its waters reach a depth of more than 400 feet, and the level of the lake has been rising, so that of its seven known islands, Aghtamar, Arti, Lim, Ktuts, Tsipan, Tokian, and Artske, the last three have disappeared beneath the waves.⁶

From the town of Van there is an extraordinary view across the lake to Mount Sipan (earlier Nekh Masik, now Süphan), an extinct volcano more than 10,000 feet high. The waters of Lake Van are a glorious shade of blue, but with no outlet they have become alkaline and undrinkable. The borax gleaned from the alkaline deposits along the shore has traditionally been made into a detergent called *berek* (*perek*). The sole fish in the lake, called in Armenian the *tarekh* (*darekh*), is found only in the fresh waters at the mouth of the Arest River (now the Bendimahi-chai). In ancient and medieval times it was caught here at a point called the Royal Fisheries for the table of the Armenian kings, but in the Middle Ages it was dried and salted for export abroad.⁷ The Van region is largely composed of mountains, only 15 percent being made up of plains. These plains are fertile, however, and besides offering excellent pasturage for cattle, sheep, and goats,

³ Pavstos Buzandatsi, *Patmutiun Hayots*, ed. Kerobe Patkanian (St. Petersburg, 1883); trans. Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Epic Histories (Buzanadaran Patmut'iwink')* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), cited hereafter as BP. See MK, I.xii for Bznuniats Tsov, and BP *passim*.

⁴ BP, III.x.

⁵ Statistics on the size and depth of Lake Van vary somewhat in different reference works. These figures are based on the data in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (1974).

⁶ Our only source for all seven isles and their names is the seventh-century geographical text, the *Ashkharhatsoyts*. See Robert H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1992), Book V, chap. 22, sections, iv and vii, cited hereafter as Hewsen, *Geography*.

⁷ Hewsen, *Geography*, V.22.viii; BP, III.viii: *Dzknateank arkuni* (Royal Fisheries).

they yield plentiful crops of barley, wheat, and rye.

Urartu: The Kingdom of Van

Despite the Armenian traditions of Hayk, the basin of Lake Van has actually been inhabited since prehistoric times. In the surrounding mountains are found one of the largest collections of petroglyphs—picture writing on rocks—in the old world. We know little of the people of Nairi beyond the fact that they seem to have been a federation of different tribes.⁸ Of the Kingdom of Van, we know more, however, because the Urartians have left us inscriptions in their language using the Assyrian script which can now be read. Though their language was totally different from Armenian, their depictions of themselves on numerous artifacts reveal facial features that can still be seen among Armenians today, especially those from the region of Van.

Whatever its origin and ethnic composition, the kingdom of Van appears to have been founded in the ninth century B.C. by a certain Arame, whose name has come down in Armenian tradition as that of the great leader Aram.⁹ King Arame's capital lay at Arzashkun on the northeastern shore of the lake, probably near the site of old Arjesh, now inundated by the waters of Lake Van; his successors would move their capital to the high isolated rock to the south of the lake, which became the nucleus of their new capital, the city of Tushpa. Curiously, the name of the fortress and the town at its foot would eventually become Tosp, the Armenian name for the district around the Great Rock, while Biainili, the native name of the kingdom, would give rise to the Armenian name Van for the town, which was sometimes called by both names: Van-Tosp.¹⁰

For more than two centuries, the kingdom of Van was the major force blocking Assyrian expansion to the north and in so doing, gradually expanded to occupy almost the whole of the territory of later Armenia. Argistinikhili, an Urartian foundation in the Ararat plain, would one day become Armavir, the first Armenian capital, while Erebuni, a fortress that served as another Urartian center in the Ararat

⁸ Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963), p. 49. Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2.

⁹ For Aram, see MK, I.13-14.

¹⁰ Van-Tosp is used by MK, III.35, and BP, IV.55 (Van-Tozob).

plain, over time evolved into the modern Erevan. Apart from developing its own religion, culture, art, and political system, Biainili was particularly sophisticated in architecture, which was adapted to resist the earthquakes so common on the plateau. Sophisticated, too, was the irrigation system of Biainili; one of the canals built by King Menuas is still being used to carry fresh water to Van.

Biainili-Urartu offered a powerful rival to Assyrian domination of the high plateau, and numerous Assyrian campaigns were waged against it. By the seventh century B.C., however, the long struggle with Assyria had taken its toll on both states. In 612 B.C., Assyria was over-whelmed by a coalition of Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes, and soon after, Biainili, invaded by the Scythians, succumbed as well.¹¹ Sometime in the following two centuries of Median and Persian rule, the Armenian kingdom took shape. Urartu was remembered only as Ayrarat, the name of the central Armenian plain, and the physical remains of the Vannic state came to be attributed to the semi-legendary Assyrian Queen Shamiram, known to history by the Greek form of her name, Semiramis. The canal of Menuas, for example, is still known as the Shamiram-su (river of Semiramis).¹² Under the Armenian kings, the center of gravity on the great plateau shifted to the plain of Ayrarat, and for a thousand years, the town of Van, often known as Shamiramakert (built by Semiramis),¹³ fell outside the main theater of activity.

Ancient Van

History is not altogether silent about Van in the long centuries between the fall of Biainili-Urartu and the appearance of our first Armenian sources a millennium later. In the second century B.C., the Greek writer Diodorus of Sicily tells of the constructions of the Queen Semiramis at a place in "Media" that he calls Khauon, which, given the absence of "v" in Classical Greek, is not a bad rendering of the Armenian "Van."¹⁴ Later, in the second century A.D., the Greek geo-

¹¹ Toumanoff, *Studies*, pp. 52-54, and especially Igor M. Diakonoff, *Pre-History of the Armenian People*, trans. Lori Jennings (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1984), *passim*.

¹² Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 60, 73, 122.

¹³ MK, II.xix.

¹⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, II.13.iii.

grapher Ptolemy of Alexandria mentions a town of Thospia and another called Bouana, both of which, given Ptolemy's penchant for duplicating place names found under different spellings in different sources, could easily be Van, the first under its lingering Urartian name, the second under its Armenian name.¹⁵

Van emerges in the full light of history in the fourth century A.D. at which time, we are told, "Shamiramakert" was burned by the Sasanid Persians during their punitive invasion of Armenia in around 363.¹⁶ Some 5,000 Armenian families and 18,000 Jewish families were assertedly carried off to Persia. If we take these figures at face value and allow five members to a family, the population of Van at that time would have been some 115,000 people.¹⁷ Although these figures cannot be accepted, it is possible that the proportion of Armenian to Jewish families may be within reason.

From what we can gather, the town of Van and its district, together with the other lands that came to comprise the later kingdom of Vaspurakan, were in the days of the Armenian monarchy the domains of a number of Armenian princely families. These princely lands were as follows:

1. The principality of Ervandunik, which probably included the tiny districts of Gukan, Artashesian, Artavanian, and Tosp, had its center either at Van itself or at nearby Ostan (Vostan).¹⁸ The ruling House of Ervandunik was descended from the Ervanduni or Orontid royal

¹⁵ Ptolemy, *Geography*, trans. and ed. Edward L. Stevenson (New York: New York Public Library, 1932), V.12.

¹⁶ BP, IV.lv.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ The question of who owned the princeless lands of Armenia has been analyzed in various publications by the author. The basic premise of such inquiry into what might best be called "dynastic geography" is that some principalities consisted of one district in Armenia, while others were made up of several districts but bore the name of one nuclear district that served as their center. In determining who owned the princeless lands, it has been useful to look at the arrangement of the districts and the surrounding mountains in order to determine to which principality they logically belonged. As for the districts themselves, their location for the most part has been determined by Stepan Eremyan, though in some cases especially in regard to the most eastern districts, some reconsideration has been necessary. See Stepan Eremyan, *Hayastane est "Ashkharatsoys"-i* [Armenia According to the "Ashkharatsoys"] (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1963); Robert H. Hewsen, "Introduction to the Study of Armenian Historical Geography: The Nature of the Problem," in *Geography*, pp. 146-220, 249-65.

family that had ruled Armenia in one branch or another between the time of Alexander the Great and the time of Christ. The family perished in the Vardanants War.¹⁹

2. The principality of Aghbak, probably with the adjacent, princeless districts of Gazrikiank and Taygriank, was ruled by one Artsruni branch or another until the Ottoman conquest of Van in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁰

3. The principality of Rshtunik, lying along the southwestern shore of the lake, very likely also included the adjacent districts of Buzhunik and Arnoyotn (Foot of Mount Arnos). The Rshtunis, of probable royal Urartian origin, are last heard of in the Arab period (seventh-ninth centuries), when they must have become extinct.²¹

4. The principality of Bznunik lay along the western shore of the lake and probably included the adjacent district of Erevark. Its princely House of Bznuni was exterminated by the King Trdat the Great early in the fourth century A.D., and its lands were given to the Armenian Church.²²

5. The principality of Apahunik was centered around Manavazakert or Manazkert (Manzikert). Its princely family, the House of Apahuni, is last heard of in the mid-ninth century.²³

6. The principality of Arberani, which lay along the eastern shore of Lake Van near its most northeastern end and probably contained the princeless district of Barilovit to the east, belonged to the House of Gnuni, another Ervanduni branch, last heard of in around 914.²⁴

7. The principality of Mehnunik or Metsnunik, probably located north of Ervandunik along the middle course of the Marmet River north of Lake Arjesh, was ruled by a branch of the Paluni House, whose original holdings lay northwest of Taron.²⁵

8. The principality of Andzevatsik, in the mountains south of Ervandunik, was centered at the castle of Kangavar. Its princes, possi-

¹⁹ Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 204.

²⁰ Ibid. See also Robert H. Hewsen, "Artsrunid House of Sefedinian: A Principality in Ecclesiastical Guise," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 1 (1984): 123-38.

²¹ Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 213.

²² Ibid., p. 216.

²³ Ibid., p. 199.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 205.

²⁵ Ibid.

bly of Medo-Kurdish origin, disappeared after 867.²⁶

9. The tiny principality of Ake, which was centered in the fortress of that name at the foot of Mount Akenis, was ruled by princes, also of possible Median origin, who are last known in the early tenth century.²⁷

10. The large land of the Mardpetakan lay in the midst of these other principalities and probably comprised the districts of Mardastan, Bun (Main or Original) Mardastan, Chuash-rot, Tornavan, Arjishakovit, Khughanovit, Aghand-rot, Krchunik, and, across the Araxes River, the district of Nakhchawan. A royal land by the fourth century, the Mardpetakan may have been originally a part of Artaz. Its center was apparently the city of Nakhchawan (Greek: Naxouana or Apobaterion, the latter a translation of the Armenian folk etymology Nakhichevan "place of the descent [of Noah from the Ark]").²⁸

11. The principality of Artaz was owned by the Amatunis, who also boasted a Median origin and may very well have ruled over the entire Mardpetakan before it became a royal land governed by the Grand Chamberlain of Armenia. Artaz, as a separate principality, was centered at the castle of Maku. Ousted from Artaz by the Arabs, the Amatuni are known as vassals of the Artsrunis in the tenth century and of the Georgian Bagratuni dynasty as late as the fourteenth century.²⁹

12. Andzakhidzor, the tiny principality of the Ensayatsi family, occupied the valley of the Andzakh River. Its ruling house is not heard of after the Vardanants War in 451.³⁰

13. The large land of Parspatunik, east of Lake Urmia (Armenian: Kaputan Tsov, meaning Blue Sea), between Mardpetakan and the district of Her, was also known as Marats Amur Ashkharh (strong land of the Medes).³¹ Apparently belonging to the Armenian royal house and representing at least a part of the large holdings of the Armenian crown in the Iranian province of Atrpatakan, Parspatunik probably included the neighboring districts of Gabitian and Bakran (Marand).

²⁶ Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 197.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 169-71.

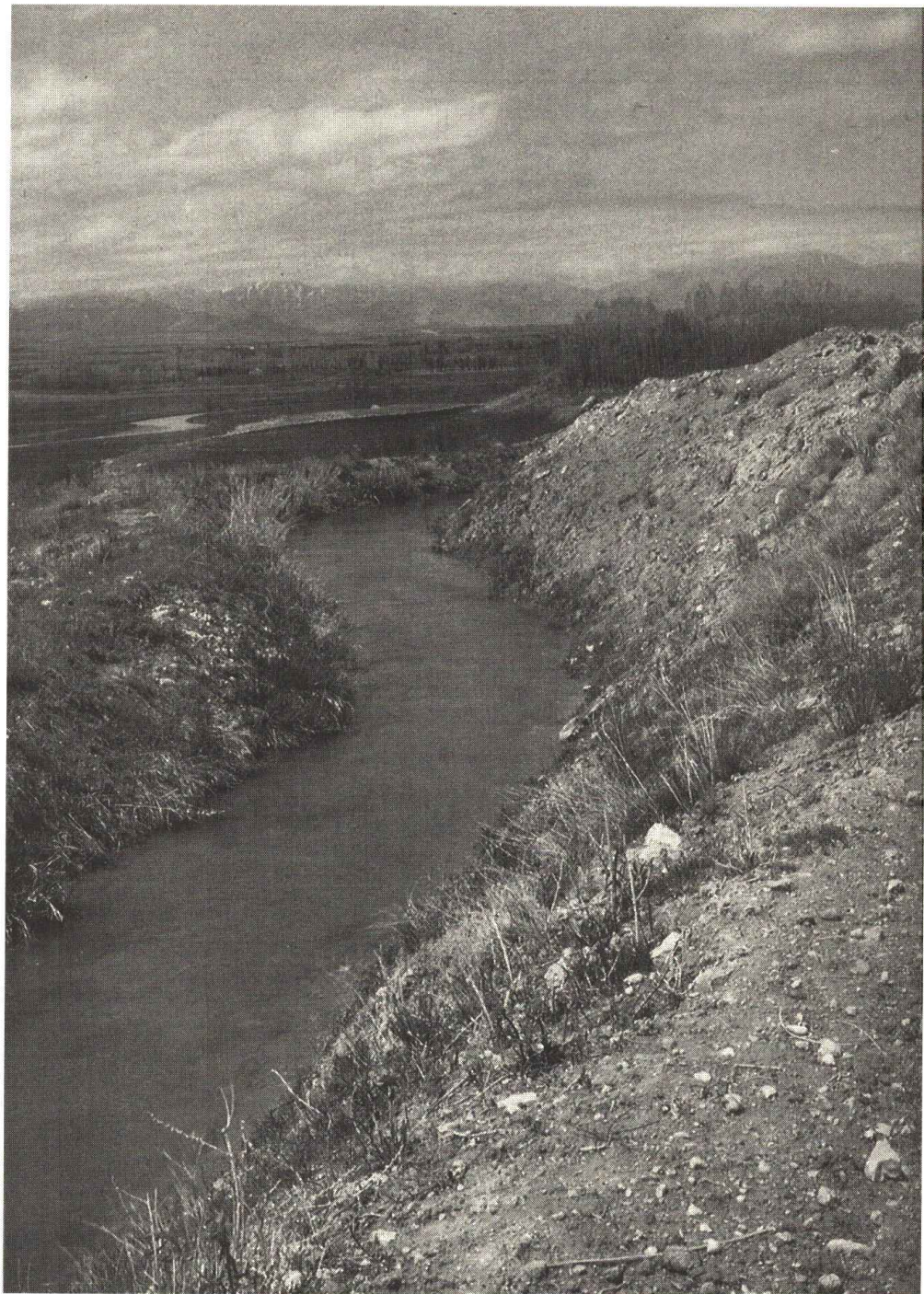
²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

³¹ Robert H. Hewsen, "Introduction to Armenian Historical Geography IV. The Vitaxates of Arsacid Armenia: Reexamination of the Territorial Aspects of the Institution," *Revue des études arméniennes* 21 (1988-89): 97-149; Hewsen, *Geography*, p. 188n180.



Uartian Inscriptions (Paul Müller-Simonis)



The Semiramis Aqueduct

The entire concatenation of mountains between the principalities of Andzevatsik and Siunik appears to have been heavily, if not entirely, Median in ethnic complexion, as indeed it was Kurdish before World War I. As noted, one of its districts was called Mardastan (land of the Medes), while another was called Bun Mardastan or Mardutsayk (habitat of the Medes). Here, too, lay the towns of Marakan (Median place)³² and, to the north, Maravan (Mede-town).³³ If the Medes (the Mars or Mards as the Armenians called them) were indeed the ancestors, even in part, of the modern Kurds, then a case can be made for describing the ancient population of this area as proto-Kurdish.

14. Somewhere in this part of Armenia lay the principality of Trpatunik or Atrpatunik, but there is no firm proof where the lands of the family actually lay, and the house, called Truni, last heard of in the mid-ninth century, seems to have been relatively unimportant.³⁴

Three of these houses seem to have been especially prominent in the region: those of Rshtuni, Ervanduni (Orontid), and Artsruni, the latter quite possibly a branch of the Ervanduni.³⁵ The other princes of the region lived in their shadow and, after the extermination of the Rshtunis in the fourth century and the disappearance of the Ervandunis in around 451, the Artsrunis inherited both their territories and their importance. Moreover, with the fall of the Armenian Arshakuni (Arsacid) monarchy in 428, the Artsrunis appear to have acquired the entire territory of the Mardpets, so that before 500 A.D., the bulk of Vaspurakan was already in their hands and, with the Mamikonians, Bagratunis, and Siunis, they were one of the four great princely houses in the land.

Early Medieval Van

In around 387 A.D. Armenia was partitioned by the Romans and the Persians, with the region of Van remaining under Persian rule.³⁶ During

³² N[ikoghayos] Adontz, *Armenia v epokhu Iustiniana* (St. Petersburg, 1908); trans. Nina G. Garsoïan, *Armenia in the Period of Justinian* (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1970), cited hereafter as Adontz, *Justinian*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 221; Hewsen, *Geography*, pp. 186-87n164.

³⁵ Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 199.

³⁶ Adontz, *Justinian*, p. 9.

the Vardanants War, a few decades later, the princes of the area played a major role and some of them (e.g., the Ervandunis) are not heard of thereafter. After the fall of the Armenian monarchy in 428, the House of Artsruni rose rapidly until after the Vardanants War. It gradually gained control of most of the basin of Lake Van, acquiring some principalities as their houses disappeared and reducing others to vassals.

In the Armenian geographical text known as the *Ashkharhatsoyts*, the principalities are ignored and instead this entire region appears as thirty-five districts gathered into a vast province called Vaspurakan, an Iranian term not previously encountered in any Armenian source.³⁷ Since this geography dates from the seventh century and reflects the changes that took place after the great Byzantine expansion into central Armenia in 591, it seems that Vaspurakan, which is either an elegant Iranian synonym for "Persian"³⁸ or a term meaning a royal land,³⁹ must have been used by the Persians to refer to the bulk of the Armenian lands still retained by Persia. The Persian Armenian principalities after 591 included Mokk to the west of Vaspurakan and Siunik in the east. Vaspurakan, which occupied the entire area between the two, may have been simply the name that the Persians gave to a new province created to gather the small principalities—the loose ends as it were—lying between Mokk and Siunik into a single jurisdiction. If the term "Vaspurakan" really does refer to a royal land, then it may well be that all of these principalities between Mokk and Siunik formed a territory whose revenues went directly to the Persian kings.

In the 630s, the Arabs, armed with the militant new faith of Islam, crushed and conquered the Persian Empire. Almost immediately, they began their expansion into Armenia, which they overran and set up as a viceroyalty under Armenian and non-Armenian governors known as *ostikans*. Under Arab rule, the Artsruni princes continued to expand, although they seem never to have acquired all of Vaspurakan, for Artaz and lands to the east of it, including Nakhichevan, were cut off from Vaspurakan during the Arab period.⁴⁰ The Arabs, moreover, set up

³⁷ Adontz, *Justinian*, pp. 337-38; Toumanoff, *Studies*, p. 331; Hewsen, *Geography*, p. 179n144.

³⁸ Adontz, *Justinian*, pp. 180-81.

³⁹ Arthur Christensen, *L'Iran sous les Sassanides*, 2d ed. (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1944), p. 103.

⁴⁰ For the Arab period, see Joseph Laurent, *L'Arménie entre Byzance et l'Islam depuis la conquête arabe jusqu'en 836* (Paris: Fontemoing, 1919); Joseph Muyltermans, *La Domi-*

a number of Muslim enclaves in the Lake Van area, including the emirates of Berkri, Arjesh, Adiljavaz (Adiljevaz), Akhlat, and the large state of the Kaysid emirs centered at Manazkert.⁴¹ In this period Van and its region moved back into the main stream of history, because the Arab trade route from Iran passed through the cities on the north shore of the lake on its way to Bitlis and Mesopotamia, while a secondary but nonetheless important road carried trade along the south shore of the lake to Bitlis via Van.⁴²

The Kingdom of Vaspurakan, 908-1021

With the assumption of the royal title in 884/85, the Bagratuni House of central Armenia established a precedent whereby any princely dynast with a certain wealth and political power at his disposal might now declare himself a king and, having obtained the acquiescence of the great powers of the day, make the title stand. Within a generation, Gagik (a local variant of the name Khachik) Artsruni, prince of Vaspurakan, seeing little distinction between the qualifications of his house and those of the Bagratunis, also began to think in royal terms. The rise of the Artsrunis from their origin as princes of Aghbak, on the borders of Korjayk, to one of the largest land-owning princely houses in Armenia has already been described. It was only in 908, however, that they became kings with the support of the Emir Yusuf of Azarbayjan (northern Iran), who, it would seem, hoped to use the Artsrunis as a counterpoise to the Bagratunis whom he feared.⁴³ Yusuf sent Gagik a crown and a robe of honor, and shortly thereafter the caliph al-Muqtadir (908-32) at Baghdad did the same. As with the Bagratuni ascension to the royal throne, the Byzantines could do nothing but acquiesce, styling Khachik *arkhon ton arkhonton* (ruler of rulers), the same rather ambiguous title they had granted Ashot Bagratuni. Like

nation arabe en Arménie (Louvain: J.-B. Istas, 1927); Aram Ter-Ghewondyan, *The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia*, trans. Nina G. Garsoïan (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1976).

⁴¹ See Ter-Ghewondian, *Arab Emirates*.

⁴² Hakob Manandyan, *Trade and Cities of Armenia in Relation to Ancient World Trade*, trans. Nina G. Garsoïan (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1965), p. 156.

⁴³ Nina G. Garsoïan, "The Independent Kingdoms of Medieval Armenia," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, vol. 1: *The Dynastic Periods* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 156-57.



THE KINGDOM OF VASPURAKAN, 908–1021

the Arabs, the Byzantines, too, doubtless saw the existence of two Armenian monarchies rather than one to be in their own best interest.⁴⁴

Fortunately, Tovma Artsruni, the tenth-century historian of the House of Artsruni, describes the division of the Artsruni lands between the two brothers Gagik and Gurgén in 903-04 which shows us clearly what the family possessed on the eve of its acquisition of the royal title.⁴⁵ To Gagik went "the east and west portions facing the north:" the fourteen districts of "Chuash, Tornavan, Artaz, Mardastan, Garni, Arberani, Aghand-rot, Barilovit, Palunik, Metsnunik, Tosp, Rshtunik, Bogunik, and Gugan."⁴⁶ To Gurgén went "the eastern part to the south: the thirteen districts of Andzakhidzor, Krjunik, Khulanovit, Mardastan, Arjishakovit, Arnoyotn, Greater and Lesser Aghbak, Ake, Tamber, Taygriank, Erna, and Zarehavan" (the last two lying outside of Vaspurakan and formerly parts of neighboring Parskahayk).⁴⁷ Besides possessing most of Vaspurakan, however, the Artsrunis soon inherited the principality of Andzevatsik, eventually acquiring at least the overlordship of the Bagratuni principality of Mokk,⁴⁸ as well as certain portions of the earlier land of Turuberan. In addition, they disputed the district of Kogovit, south of Mount Ararat, with the Bagratunis, which proved to be a continual bone of contention between the two kingdoms to the benefit of their Muslim neighbors.

The rise of Artsrunid power led to a number of other princely houses rallying to their banner. Some of these had been dispossessed by the Muslims; others simply sought Artsrunid protection. Several came from outside of Vaspurakan. Among the vassal houses were those of the Ake, Amatuni, Andzevatsi, Apahuni, Kajberuni, Varazhnuni, Vahevuni, Gnuni, Gabeghian, Havnuni, and Trpatuni or Truni.⁴⁹

The kingdom of Vaspurakan had no specific capital, the court following the king as he transferred his residence from place to place—

⁴⁴ *Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 3, p. 29.

⁴⁵ Tovma Artsruni, *Patmutiun tann Artsruniats*, ed. Kerobe Patkanian (St. Petersburg, 1887; reprinted, Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1991); trans. Robert W. Thomson, *The History of the House of Artsrunik* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985). See also V.M. Vardanyan, *Vaspurakani Artsruniats tagavorutiune* [The Artsruni Kingdom of Vaspurakan] (Erevan: Erevan State University, 1969).

⁴⁶ Tovma Artsruni, *Patmutiun*, III.29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Van, Vostan, etc. During his reign, however, Gagik I (908-43) chose to reside on the Isle of Aghtamar.⁵⁰ The greatest of the kings of Vaspurakan constructed the underground stone conduit to bring water from the summit of Mount Varag to Van, erected a palace on the slopes of Mount Artos to take advantage of the view of both the lake and the volcanic cone of Mount Nekh Masik (Sipan) beyond, and built the religious structures at the foot of the rock of Amrakan behind the city of Van: the Church of Holy Zion and its two chapels, one dedicated to the Resurrection and the other to the Ascension. But Gagik's greatest accomplishments were his constructions on Aghtamar itself. This islet, once the property of the Rshtuni family and already fortified in the fourth century, lies just off shore and is a little over a quarter of a square mile in size. Beginning with a hard gray limestone cliff rising about 260 feet above the waters, the height declines to the east to a broad level site where a spring provides ample water. Here Gagik founded a town; erected a large, square palace consisting of a great domed hall surrounded by exedrae and other chambers decorated with murals; built magazines, storehouses, and a treasury; laid out streets, gardens, and orchards; and planted trees and designed areas of recreation and relaxation for himself and his court. In the midst of all stood his crowning achievement and the only one which survives, the Palatine Cathedral of the Holy Cross, to which a monastery was later attached.⁵¹ Built of pink sandstone by the architect Manvel during the years 915-21, the interior measures nearly 49 feet by 38 feet, with the dome extending 67 feet above ground, supported by a high circular drum resting on four pendentives rather than columns. Decorated on the inside with elaborate murals, the cathedral is best known for its almost unprecedented sculptures in high relief which cover the entire exterior of the building with biblical scenes and which represent in Armenia the summit of the stone-worker's art. It should be noted that, apart from the constructions known to have been built by Gagik I, the famous monastery of Narek was founded during his reign and perhaps also that of Iluvank. To King Gagik is personally attributed the founding of Karmravank (Red Monastery).⁵²

⁵⁰ For Gagik's reign and the kingdom of Vaspurakan in general, see Vardanyan, *Vaspurakani Artsruniats tagavorutiune*.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² A number of books now exist describing this monument, among them Sirarpie Der

Despite the lavish expense devoted to the erection of the cathedral at Aghtamar, the necropolis of the Artsruni kings was located elsewhere, at a monastery on the slopes of Mount Varag known as Varagavank (Turkish: Yedi Kilisa, meaning Seven Churches). Founded by King Senekerim-Hovhannes (Sennacherib-John) early in his reign (1003-24) to house a relic of the True Cross that had been kept in a simple seventh-century hermitage on the same site, the monastery lay about 5 miles east of Van hidden from the lake by a mountain spur. It is not clear if this hermitage had been the royal necropolis before this time, but we do know that as early as 981, Senekerim's wife, Queen Khoshush, had built a church here dedicated to the Holy Wisdom (Surb Sopi). Over the years, Varagavank became the richest and most celebrated monastery of the Lake Van area.⁵³ Here resided the archbishops of Van until the late nineteenth century, when one of them, the future Catholicos Mkrtich Khrimian "Hayrik" (Father), founded *Artsvi Vaspurakan* (The Eagle of Vaspurakan), the first newspaper ever printed in Armenia proper.⁵⁴

The Cession of the Kingdom to Byzantium

Not long after acquiring the principality of Tayk in the year 1000, the Emperor Basil II offered King Senekerim-Hovhannes lavish domains in Cappadocia within the Byzantine Empire were he to agree to cede his kingdom to the empire.⁵⁵ The king declined at first, but as the Turkish raids began on his southern frontier in 1018 (and probably also because of his own sense of insecurity on a throne that he had virtually usurped), he changed his mind and sent his son David to

Nersessian, *Aght'amar: Church of the Holy Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965); *Aght'amar* in the series *Documenti di architettura armena*, vol. 3 (Milan: Ares, 1974); Stepan Kh. Mnatsakanyan, *Aght'amar* (Erevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences, 1983), English trans. K.H. Maksoudian ([Los Angeles]: Editions Ereboundi, 1986). Thomas A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: An Architectural and Archaeological Survey*, vol. 1 (London: Pindar Press, 1987); Paolo Cuneo, *Architettura armena* (Rome, 1988); J.G. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art and Architecture: The Church of the Holy Cross, Aght'amar* (London: Pindar Press, 1991).

⁵³ For Varagavank, see Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 113-15.

⁵⁴ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 1, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Gérard Dédéyan, "L'immigration arménienne en Capadoce au XI^e siècle," *Byzantion* 45 (1975): 41-117.

negotiate with Basil at Trebizond, where the emperor was preparing for a campaign against the Georgians.

The terms having been agreed upon, the transfer of territories took place in 1021, Vaspurakan reportedly containing ten cities and 4,000 villages.⁵⁶ Although the Artsrunis claimed possession of the cities of Manazkert, Khghat, Artske, Arjesh, and Berkri at this time, it seems clear that this was merely a domination—perhaps even a fictitious one—over the four local Arab emirates, Akhlat, Dat al-Djauz, Arjesh, and Barghiri, whose rulers were not really ousted until the Byzantine occupation. Manazkert had never been held by the Artsunis, and it was already Byzantine when it was included in the list of the ten cities ceded by Senekerim-Hovhannes. The other five of the ten "cities" supposedly contained in the realm were Van, Vostan, Khizan, Ketsan, and Hoghts, the last two of which were actually fortresses (the first guarding the passage from Khizan to Rshtunik via the valley of the Arvanis River; the second guarding the road from Ketsan to Bitlis), although both of them may have had towns of some significance around them. Of these five towns, Vostan is the only one known to have possessed a town wall as well as a citadel, but we do not know what the situation was at Amiuk or Van. After the cession, Senekerim-Hovhannes, together with his immediate family, his court, the high clergy of his realm, and supposedly 14,000 families, moved to Sebasteia (Sebastia, Sivas), where the entire Byzantine province of that name was placed at his disposal. When the king died in 1024, however, his body was taken back to Vaspurakan to be buried in the monastery of Varag; his widowed queen was later buried by his side.⁵⁷

Under Byzantine rule, Vaspurakan was known as Baspraknia or Asprakania and placed under an administrator with the title *katapan*.⁵⁸ We have no idea where this official had his seat though it may have been at Van (Byzantine: Iban). We know that he did not sit at Manazkert, which was the center of a separate province organized by the Byzantines under the name "Upper Media." The Byzantines did

⁵⁶ The number of villages may be exaggerated, but as late as the time of Cuinet (ca. 1890), the *vilayet* of Van had some 2,279 villages, of which more than half lay in the *sanjak* of Van itself.

⁵⁷ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 115.

⁵⁸ Karen N. Yuzbashyan, "L'Administration byzantine en Arménie aux X^e-XI^e siècles," *Revue des études arméniennes* 10 (Paris, 1973-74): 139-84.

everything in their power to establish in Vaspurakan the Byzantine Church, which during their occupation of the region broke with Rome and the papacy (1054) to become the Greek Orthodox Church. Over a dozen Greek episcopal sees were established in Taron and the basin of Lake Van, although none of them survived the Turkish invasions that forever swept the Byzantines from the Armenian Plateau.⁵⁹

Late Medieval Van

The raids of the Seljuk Turks reached Vaspurakan by 1020. The Bagratuni capital, the great city of Ani, fell to the Turks in 1064, and in 1071 they crushed a Byzantine army led by Emperor Romanus Diogenes at Manazkert. The Seljuks now poured into Anatolia where they set up their center at Konia far to the west, preferring to rule the outlying reaches of their conquests through local vassals. In this way, Vaspurakan, together with Taron to the west of it, passed into the hands of a Muslim dynasty known as the Shah-i Arman (King of Armenia),⁶⁰ who made their capital at Van holding forth there (1100-1206) until replaced by the Umayyds.⁶¹ During this time, a line of Armenian princes continued to hold Mekk,⁶² while a number of local Kurdish notables began to set themselves up at various points south of the lake.⁶³

During this period a catholicosate emerged on the isle of Aghtamar, which from the year 1116 served as the ecclesiastical center of the Lake Van area.⁶⁴ Originally an anti-catholicosate in schism from the recognized Supreme Catholicos of the Armenian Church, Aghtamar allowed the schism to be healed in 1420 when the incumbent agreed to accept the authority of the Supreme Catholicos in return for being permitted to keep the title catholicos for himself. Gradually becoming a hereditary office, the Catholicosate of Aghtamar was always in the

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey*, vol. 1, p. 328ff.

⁶¹ Turkish Ministry of Culture, *Van* (Ankara, 1987), p. 116, cited hereafter as TMC, *Van*.

⁶² See the Armenian Soviet Encyclopedia, *Haykakan Sovetakan Hanragitaran*, vol. 7, s.v. "Mekk."

⁶³ Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey*, vol. 1, p. 330ff.

⁶⁴ Malachia (Maghakia) Ormanian, *The Church of Armenia*, 2d rev. English ed. (London: Mombay, 1955).

hands of a member of a line of the Artsruni family, a situation that lasted until the 1530s.⁶⁵

In the thirteenth century the campaigns of the Khwarizm shahs, fleeing the Mongol invasion of their country east of the Caspian Sea, swept away the Umayyds but a decade of renewed Seljuk rule was terminated by the Mongol conquest of Armenia. Despite their initial devastations, the Mongol khans and their descendants, the Ilkhanid dynasty of Iran, brought a long period of peace and prosperity during which trade, monastic life, the construction of churches and caravansaries, and the production of manuscripts reached a high degree of development.⁶⁶ A characteristic of the Ilkhanid period was the establishment of a number of firmly entrenched Kurdish emirs in the area, especially to the south, southwest, west, and northwest of the lake. As the Ilkhans weakened, Armenia passed under the control of two rival Turkmen dynasties, the White Sheep (Ak Koyunlu) centered at Diarbekir (Diyarbakr) and the Black Sheep (Kara Koyunlu) centered at Tabriz, both of which continued to rule the Van region through the local Kurdish emirs.⁶⁷

In 1387 Armenia was invaded by the hordes of Timur (Tamerlane), a warlord newly emerged from Central Asia. Timur ravaged much of Armenia but at Van outdid himself in the cruelty for which his name has become legendary. Setting aside the inhabitants whom he felt he could hold for ransom, Timur had the rest of the population driven to the top of the Rock of Van, whose fortress he had totally demolished, and from there had them thrown off the cliff to their deaths. We are told that so many people were dealt with in this way that some survived because the dead had piled so high that the last victims had not that far to fall.⁶⁸

Briefly interrupted by the invasions of Timur, the two Turkmen federations reemerged as rivals in Armenia after the death of Timur's son, Shah Rukh, in 1410. For decades thereafter, the Black Sheep and White Sheep clans surged back and forth across the country ravaging

⁶⁵ Hewsens, "Sefedinian," pp. 128-29.

⁶⁶ Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey*, vol. 1, p. 330.

⁶⁷ Ibid.; John E. Woods, *The Aqquyunlu: Clan, Federation, Empire* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1976).

⁶⁸ Tovma Metsobetsi, *Patmutiun Lank-Tamuray ev hajordats iurots* [History of Leng Timur and His Successors], ed. Karapet vardapet Shahnazarian (Paris: K.V. Shahnazarian, 1860).

it beyond description. Throughout the fifteenth century, massacre, pillage, enslavement, and rape filled the land, followed by the inevitable famine and waves of disease. In Armenia, trade and commerce came to a standstill, cultural life almost ceased to exist, and large numbers of the local people abandoned their hearths for other lands.⁶⁹ The White Sheep crushed the Black Sheep in 1469, but after the death of their chieftain Uzun Hasan in 1469, a sworn enemy of the Ottoman Turks, the White Sheep disintegrated into warring factions and their power was at an end by 1500.⁷⁰ Shortly thereafter, however, Ismail Safi, a grandson of Uzun Hasan, who had spent his childhood protected by the monks at Aghtamar, seized control of Persia. There he founded the Safavid dynasty, which quickly renewed hostilities against the Ottoman Turks.

Ottoman Van

A century and a half of Ottoman-Safavid wars now ensued, the common people of Armenia bearing the brunt of the constant devastation.⁷¹ The region of Van was first overrun by the Ottoman Turks in 1534. When conquered definitively in 1548, its northern sector was organized into a vast province known as an *eyalet*, which by 1609 included the *sanjaks* (counties) of Alashkert and Bayazid, as well as most of the later *vilayet* (province) of Bitlis. Until the mid-nineteenth century, however, many of the *sanjaks* of the *eyalet* were still under the rule of the virtually independent, local Kurdish *derebeys* (valley lords), and Ottoman rule was usually little more than nominal beyond the city of Van itself. The Ottoman traveler Evliya Chelebi has left a detailed description of Van in the mid-seventeenth century when it was still heavily fortified against a renewal of hostilities with Safavid Iran.⁷² According to him, the castle of Van was a structure of enormous strength surrounded by seven walls with seventy turrets and

⁶⁹ Avedis K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts (1301-1480)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969). The colophons of the fifteenth century detail the horrors taking place in Armenia during that period.

⁷⁰ See Woods, *Aqquyunlu*.

⁷¹ Donald E. Pitcher, *An Historical Geography of the Ottoman Empire from Earliest Times to the End of the Sixteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 100-43.

⁷² Evliya Chelebi, quoted in TMC, *Van*, p. 178.

staffed by 6,000 troops not counting another 6,000 posted in six of the nine other castles that still surrounded the lake (Amiuk, Arjesh, Adiljavaz, Akhlat, Datvan or Tatvan, and Vostan). Some fifty ships plied the waters of the lake in his time.

After the Russian invasion of 1828, the Ottoman government was obliged to bring the frontier lands under closer control. In 1847, the last derebeys were suppressed and the eyalet of Van was made a sanjak of the eyalet of Erzerum, which had always been under a firm Ottoman hold.⁷³ In 1875, however, when this cumbersome province was broken up, the sanjaks of Van and Hakkari or Hekkiari became separate vilayets, only to be joined together once again into a greater vilayet of Van in 1888. The new administrative unit consisted then of two sanjaks, nineteen *kazas* (districts), and three hundred *nahiyes* (townships or village clusters), altogether containing 2,279 villages.⁷⁴ Archbishop Maghakia Ormanian states that there were 275 Armenian parishes of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and subsequent studies have demonstrated that there were more than 400 Armenian villages in the province.⁷⁵ Van was the capital both of the vilayet and of the sanjak of that name; Julemerk or Julamerk (Armenian: Jghmar) became the capital of Hakkari. The area of the vilayet was 47,700 square kilometers (18,417 square miles).

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the city of Van was confined within its walls; a wonderfully accurate color drawing of the city recently discovered in the archives of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul shows it to have been, in about 1600, a handsome town at the foot of its cliff, whose churches and mosques dominated the skyline.⁷⁶ After about 1850, however, the city began to overflow its wall, spreading haphazardly to the east where there developed what was called Aygestan, the "Vineyard" or "Garden district." Here the wealthy inhabitants of the city, Christian and Muslim, built villas surrounded by greenery and orchards, and here the increasing number of foreign missionaries and consuls settled.⁷⁷

⁷³ Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey*, vol. 1, p. 340.

⁷⁴ Vital Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1890), vol. 2, p. 632.

⁷⁵ Ormanian, *Church of Armenia*, p. 206. See also the chapter by Sarkis Karayan in this volume.

⁷⁶ This drawing has been reproduced in color in TMC, *Van*, pp. 180-81.

⁷⁷ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 81.

As the governor of a frontier province, the *vali* of Van commanded some 1,500 troops based at Van itself, with another two battalions stationed at Bashkale, besides a force of 1,000 *zaptiehs* (gendarmerie or local militia). Despite the proximity of the frontier, Persia had long since ceased to be a threat to the Ottoman Empire and the fortifications of the citadel in Van, though usually closed to foreign visitors, were well known to be in disrepair.⁷⁸

Population

Among the divisions of the six Armenian vilayets in Turkish Armenia, the sanjak of Van was the only one in which the Armenians formed the majority of the population. This majority was lost in the vilayet, however, and probably deliberately so, by the merging of Van with Hakkari, whose population was overwhelmingly Muslim and Kurdish mixed with minorities of Yezidi Kurds and Aisors (Assyrian Christians of the Nestorian sect, a small number of whom, under the name Chaldeans, had become Catholic). Turks were few in the vilayet, and many of these were Islamicized Armenians and Turkicized Kurds. Much of the province was remote and no census taken there before modern times may be considered reliable even by Ottoman standards. Thus, the figures below must be used with special caution.

Vital Cuinet (ca. 1890)⁷⁹

Muslims	
Turks	30,500
Kurds	210,000
Circassians	500
Christians	
Armenian Apostolics	79,000
Armenian Catholics	708
Armenian Protestants	290
Nestorians, autonomous	52,000
Nestorian <i>rayahs</i> (subjects)	40,000
Chaldean Catholics	6,000

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

⁷⁹ See Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, vol. 2, p. 636

Latin Catholics	2
Others	
Yezidis	5,400
Gypsies	600
Jews	5,000
TOTAL	430,000

Maghakia Ormanian⁸⁰

(Armenians in the four dioceses of the vilayet, 1910)

Armenian Apostolics	191,000
Armenian Catholics	500
Armenian Protestants	200
TOTAL	191,700

Armenian Patriarchate (1912)⁸¹
(Hekkiari excluded)

Armenians	185,000
Assyrian Jacobites	18,000
Turks	47,000
Nomadic Kurds	40,000
Sedentary Kurds	32,000
Yezidis	25,000
Gypsies	3,000
TOTAL	350,000

Ottoman Statistics (1911-12)⁸²

Muslims	(69%) 179,380
Non-Muslims	(31%) 79,760
TOTAL	259,140

⁸⁰ Ormanian, *Church of Armenia*, pp. 205-07.

⁸¹ *Réponse au mémoire de la Sublime-Porte en date 12 février 1919* (Constantinople, 1919), p. 46, Appendix E; Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 36.

⁸² Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Ottoman Anatolia at the End of the Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), p. 76.

Justin McCarthy⁸³

Muslims	313,322
Armenians	130,500
Nestorians and Chaldeans	62,400
Jews	1,798
Yezidis	1,776
Greek	1
TOTAL	509,797

Economy before World War I

In regard to land use, 21,530 square kilometers (8,313 square miles) of the land in the province was arable; 14,346 square kilometers (5,539 square miles), barren mountains; 6,350 square kilometers (2,452 square miles), forested mountains; 20 square kilometers (8 square miles), marshland; and 5,454 square kilometers (2,106 square miles), lakes.⁸⁴ Like the rest of Armenia, the vilayet of Van was largely an agricultural and stock-breeding region. Wheat, barley, millet, corn, and rice, along with tobacco, beans, peas, grapes, figs, and almonds, were its chief crops; cattle, sheep, and goats comprised its herds. There was silver-bearing lead ore at Bashkale, and some oil at Siran, near Bashkale and at Shomoh. Lead and chalk were also found. Lake Van produced the fish tarekh, still dried and exported as in the Arab period, while the soda collected from the lakeshore was still dried into cakes and used as a detergent.⁸⁵ There was little industry in the province save for textiles, but the Armenians were known for their fine jewelers, tailors, and other craftsmen. The status of commerce, however, can be imagined from the fact that there was no bank in Van.

Although there were few forests in the province, except in the remoter mountains, its flora and fauna were very rich. Trees included the ilex, elm, and several kinds of oak, while among the animals the brown bear, wolf, fox, hyena, stag, hare, martin, and wild goat were found in the mountains, along with an occasional wildcat and small tigers.

⁸³ McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities*, pp. 39, 77, 97, 102-03.

⁸⁴ See Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie*, vol. 2, p. 631.

⁸⁵ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 40-46.

Ecclesiastical Organization

Ecclesiastically, the vilayet of Van was organized into four jurisdictions: 1) the Archdiocese of Van, including most of the sanjak (108 parishes, 130 churches and some 100,000 members); 2) the diocese of Lim and Ktuts, including the islands of those names, each with its monastery, and a number of mainland villages, together forming the nahiye of Timar (25 parishes, 32 churches, about 11,000 members; 3) the Catholicosate of Aghtamar, comprising the island of that name, residence of the Catholicos, together with the kazas or districts of Gevash (Gavash, Giavash), Shatakh, and Karjkan in the province of Van and that of Khizan in the province of Bitlis (130 parishes, 203 churches, around 70,000 members, not counting Khizan with its 64 parishes, 69 churches, and 25,000 members); and 4) the diocese of Aghbak, with its bishop officially sitting at the monastery of Saint Bartoghmeos but residing at Bashkale (20 parishes, 23 churches, 10,000 members).⁸⁶ By the 1890s, the bishop of Lim resided at Van. Catholics were few in the vilayet and their bishop resided in Mush, into whose diocese the former diocese of Van had been amalgamated.⁸⁷

The City of Van

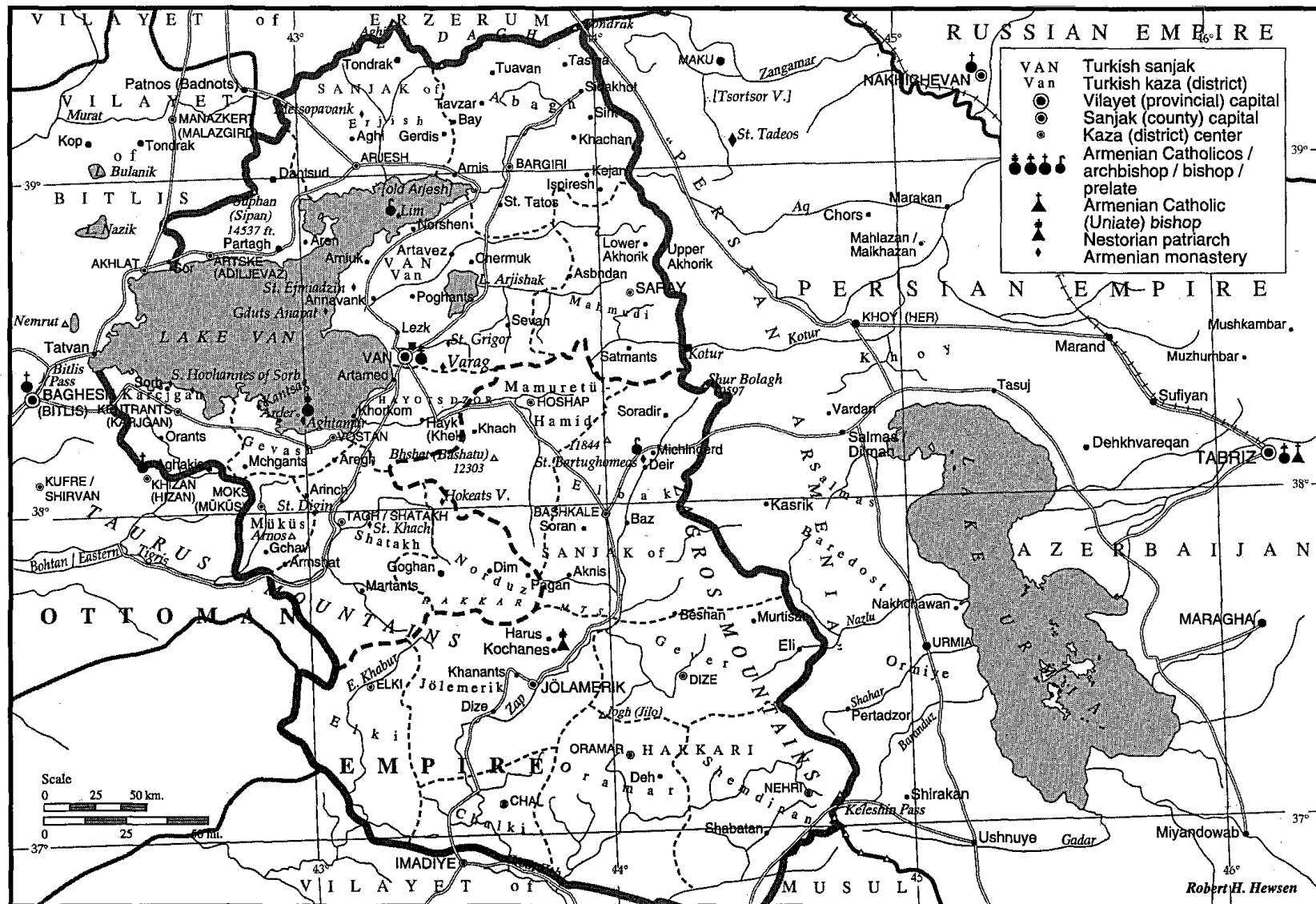
On the eve of World War I, the city of Van was still a relatively out-of-the-way place; rarely mentioned and seldom visited by foreigners. Though not located on any main highway, it was situated on the only logical route from the basin of Lake Van into Iran. Its trade was small but regular, and its bazaar was usually well-stocked with European goods. Living conditions were poor, however, for wages were low, corruption was rife, spies were everywhere, and the countryside was insecure.⁸⁸ The few well-to-do merchants were all Armenians, but local affairs were dominated by six Turkish clans of some fifty members each, who ran things much as they had done in pre-reform days.⁸⁹ These were the only true Turks in the city, the rest of the Muslims being Turkicized Kurds. Because of the large number of Armenians

⁸⁶ Ormanian, *Church of Armenia*, p. 206.

⁸⁷ *Dictionnaire de l'histoire et géographie chrétiennes*, s.v. "Arménie."

⁸⁸ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, p. 85.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, chapter 4, pp. 38-115.



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in the province, they were usually well represented in the local administration. There were two Armenians on the council that aided the governor, and from 1896 until 1907, his assistant, however silent, was always an Armenian. There were two Armenian members on the municipal council, four Armenian judges in the court of appeals (two in the civil division and two in the criminal division), and Armenians were represented equally with the Muslims in the commercial court.⁹⁰

Despite its poverty and the general backwardness of life in the villages, Van itself was one of the most Europeanized and cultivated towns in Armenia and its Christian population, heavily influenced by the foreign missionaries, American, French, and German, had largely adopted Western clothing by the 1890s. Physically, Van consisted of 1) the citadel atop the great rock cliff, 2) the old walled city (Kaghakamej), occupying 1 square mile at its base, and 3) the garden district (Aygestan), which, stretching to the southeast, covered some 8 square miles, and consisted of eleven quarters and six blocks of its own: Shamiramalti, Haykavank, Pashen-Poghan, Norshen-Ulia, Norshen-Sufla, Akerpi, Hankoysner, Arark, Gulurtagh, Norashen, Ararutstagh, Hafiz-Efendi, Karoyan, Boyents, Javshin, Shabaniyeh, and Seghke-keki.⁹¹ Located as it was, 2 to 3 miles from the shore, Van was virtually a lakeside city, the village of Akants serving as its humble "port." The walled city, entered through four gates, had narrow streets and contained some 5,000 tall, old houses with jutting balconies, some of them veritable mansions, as well as seven old wooden churches, six mosques, and large bazaars. The garden district, with its private houses shaded by tall poplars and surrounded by orchards of apples, peaches, and pomegranates and patches of melons and cucumbers, included another five churches and five mosques. In 1914, Van possessed, besides the citadel, a second fortress on the nearby height called Toprakkale, several barracks for the military units, and the *konak* or government building, with its residence, a European-style chalet on the edge of the gardens, furnished and otherwise appointed in the Western manner.⁹²

⁹⁰ Mesrob K. Krikorian, *Armenians in the Service of the Ottoman Empire, 1860-1908* (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 38.

⁹¹ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, map between pp. 80 and 81.

⁹² Rafael de Nogales, *Four Years Beneath the Crescent* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 73.

Schools and Other Amenities

The city of Van had eleven Armenian schools (six parochial, four private, and one endowed by the Armenian magnate Sanasarian) and ten Turkish (six primary, three middle, and one upper level).⁹³ Churches within the walled city included Saint Tiramayr, Saint Vardan, Saint Poghos, Saint Nshan, Saint Sahak, and Saint Tsiranavor; in Aygestan, Haykavank, Norashen, Arark, Hankoysner, and other quarters each had a church.⁹⁴ In addition, Van was the residence of three consuls (British, Russian, and Persian) and two consular agents (Italian and Austrian), and was the site of a German Protestant mission station and a French Catholic Dominican mission. By far the most important of the foreign institutions in the city, however, was the American Congregationalist mission founded by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Boston in 1871. Located in the southeast section of Aygestan, its compound included a church, five schools open to boys and girls, a hospital, a dispensary, and four large missionary residences constructed in the Western style.⁹⁵

The Catholicosate of Aghtamar

Established in 1116 and monopolized by members of families descended from the Artsruni princes until the coming of the Ottoman Turks in the mid-sixteenth century, the Catholicosate of Aghtamar was an anachronism that had degenerated over the centuries so much that under its last incumbent, Khachatur II (1864-95), it had become more of an embarrassment to the Armenian Church than an asset.⁹⁶ Instead of being a focal point for the educational and cultural advancement of the local Armenians, it was left to the monastery of Varag, under its dynamic abbot, Mkrtich Khrimian, to assume this role. When the See of Aghtamar became vacant in 1895, it was allowed to remain dormant and was suppressed in 1916. By then, the monastery had been destroyed, the monks killed, and the Cathedral of the Holy Cross looted

⁹³ Lynch, *Travels*, vol. 2, pp. 94-101.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 101-03.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 127-29, 136.

and left derelict.⁹⁷ Miraculously, it was not destroyed.

Van During the Genocide

Van generally suffered less during the events of 1895-96, when armed mobs were set loose by the Ottoman government on the Armenian population all over the rest of the country. An Ottoman force was deterred from attacking the town as the Armenian political parties joined forces to defend it. When it became known that the political leaders had left for Iran (with many ambushed and killed en route), the officially authorized massacres ended and the Van Armenians escaped the worst atrocities suffered elsewhere.⁹⁸ Marked for extermination in 1915, the Armenians of Van again got wind of what was coming and armed themselves for a spirited self-defense. For almost a month, from April 20 until May 16, a few hundred men defended themselves and their loved ones, some 30,000 people, against a Turkish armed force. At the last moment, the Turks abandoned the battle, as a Russian army and Armenian volunteer regiments from the Caucasus approached. Thereafter, the Armenians enjoyed a certain autonomy under Russian protection, but a few weeks later the Russian army suddenly withdrew. Fearing a Turkish advance, the entire Armenian population followed the Russians to the relative security of the Caucasus. Though the Russians re-occupied the region later that year and held it until 1918, Armenian Van had come to an end.⁹⁹

Van Today

After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the two sanjaks of the old vilayet of Van were separated to form the *ils* or provinces of Van and Hakkari. For a long time, the city of Van was virtually in total ruin. Gradually, however, although the old walled city was abandoned, a new town has grown up near the site of the garden district. A new boulevard, Cumhuriyet Street, is lined with

⁹⁷ Nogales, *Four Years*, p. 62, gives a rare contemporary account of what happened at Aghtamar during the siege of Van.

⁹⁸ Christopher J. Walker, *Armenia: The Survival of a Nation* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

⁹⁹ Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence*, pp. 55-57.

handsome apartment buildings and modern shops, and the town now offers decent accommodations for visitors.¹⁰⁰ There are several banks and a local museum. A university has been founded, a modern cultural center has been built, and some local industries have been established in textiles, meat processing, dairy production, animal feed, and the manufacture of chemicals and cement.¹⁰¹ Since 1970 Van has been connected by rail to the Turkish and Iranian railroad systems and the border with Iran was opened for trade in 1987. Hopes are high for turning the natural beauty of the region into a tourist attraction. There has been talk of rebuilding the old city as an outdoor museum of Ottoman urban life,¹⁰² and in the tourist brochures much is made of the local "Van cat," with its penchant for swimming and its unmatched eyes.

Turks have still not settled the Van area in great numbers, and without its Armenian population both the town and province have become centers of Kurdish life. The Cathedral of the Holy Cross on the Isle of Aghtamar survives as a testimony to the one-time presence of the Armenians of the region. A few intrepid tourists, some of them Armenians, have now begun to discover Vaspurakan, which for all the misfortunes that have taken place there retains its natural beauty unimpaired.

¹⁰⁰ Hewsen, personal observations, 1998.

¹⁰¹ TMC, *Van*, p. 178.

¹⁰² Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey*, vol. 4, p. 352.